The Choices That Define Us

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The Choices That Define Us

by StratsWrote

Summary

When Hannibal left, it nearly destroyed Will, mentally and physically. Finding Hannibal again might wreck him irreparably.

But Will can't help but seek out the family he's lost.

(Or, the Season 3 AU where Hannibal's parenting reaches it's obvious consequences, and Will learns just what it takes to raise a child.)

Notes

Starting off small. This chapter is a lot shorter than we are used to for a few reasons.
1) I wanted to give you guys something after so long away.
2) Most of the first episode of Season 3 is either flashbacks or Bedelia Adventures, and Bedelia's storyline would change very little with Michelle's inclusion.
3) Prologues are typically short anyway.

The next chapters will be longer, with some episodes combined as necessary.

See the end of the work for more notes

Prologue - Antipasto

Michelle dreamed about Daddy almost every night. She dreamed about his face, all twisted up wrong when he saw Abigail. She dreamed about him telling Tėtis he wasn't going with them. She dreamed about the choking, wet sound he'd made when Tėtis stabbed him, and the slow seeping of his blood on the tiled floor.

Those were not the worst nights.

The worst nights were when she dreamed of him smiling, laughing. When she imagined him in the apartments they shared with Miss Bedelia in Paris and then Italy. Cooking with Tėtis. Curled up on the sofa, reading a book.

Abigail was there too, sometimes, brushing Michelle's hair and laughing at something Daddy said.

Those were the worst nights, because she always had to wake up from them. Wake up, and look at Tėtis, and try to remember what it had been like to trust him.

They had moved twice now. The earliest nights had been rough, though none so rough as the first one.

Michelle had passed out on Miss Bedelia's couch at the end of the first night, too exhausted and frightened and worried to do much else. She'd woken only because Miss Bedelia had stopped to stare at her, looking between Michelle and her bedroom, where they both could hear the shower running.

"We messed up," Michelle had told her.

"Go back to sleep," Miss Bedelia had said. "I'll talk to him."

Michelle didn't know what they'd talked about, but the next time she woke, she was being bundled into Miss Bedelia's car and rushed to the airport. They'd flown for hours and hours with only the books Miss Bedelia had bought her at the airport, books Michelle could not look at because she was too busy thinking about Daddy. It was not until they landed and drove to their first home that Tėtis was able to sooth her, showing her the article he'd found on his phone.

'Will Graham Survives Cannibal Lover' had been the title. She didn't like it. Daddy didn't 'survive' them. Tėtis swore he'd never been in danger, that he'd hurt Daddy very little.

"Only enough that he could not be seen as responsible for us," Tėtis promised.

None of it made any sense to Michelle. She felt mixed up and angry inside, more still when they moved and changed names again.

Currently, she was Magnolia Fell, and Tėtis and Miss Bedelia were *Zio Roman e Zia Lydia*.

Michelle hated all three of those names. She hated lying. She hated telling everyone who asked that Tėtis was her distant uncle, that she'd come to stay in Italy for a little to have access to better schooling.

Not that many people asked her anything at all. Her Italian was only passable, and she was a kid. No one cared what she had to say.

Italy was supposed to be an adventure. Italy, Michelle decided, *sucked*.

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Florence was beautiful, if not quite how Hannibal had imagined it would be. He busied himself with the architecture, the history. He worked long hours, returning home to Bedelia and Michelle to play family. Not the family he'd wanted, but family none the less.

"You stretch your credibility thin," Bedelia said, when they'd first settled into their newest location, wearing the Fells like a tailored suit.

"I've found a peace here that I would preserve," Hannibal countered, and it was not untrue. He loved Italy, despite the flaws his life now held. It would be a wonderful place to raise his daughter. She would flourish among the art and culture, and one day, things would be easier for her, even if it seemed far away right now.

"You created a space for yourself by killing the man who would have occupied it," Bedelia said, settling onto the edge of the deep bathtub she and Michelle were both so fond of. "And created a niece out of whole cloth. You may as well have kept her as your child."

"Roman and Lydia Fell did not have children."

"They didn't have a niece, either."

"Plausible deniability," Hannibal said.

Bedelia turned on the faucet and let the water spill over her fingertips. "You seem more concerned with making appearances than keeping them. You're playing a dangerous game, Hannibal."

"You worry too much," he told her. "People seldom look too deep unless given a reason to."

"And what will we do when you decide to give them that reason?" She turned, her back to Hannibal, pulling her hair over her shoulder. "Unzip me?"

He did so, in a quick pull. Perhaps, he thought, Bedelia had hoped for something more in their relationship when they came to Italy. Or perhaps she had merely been indulging a curiosity.

Regardless, they shared the necessary intimacy that came with living together, but they did not share a bed. Hannibal was not sure he would ever bother to do so again. He could count on one hand the number of people he cared for, and two of those people were beyond his

reach. Bedelia was a suitable substitute caregiver, but she was not a suitable substitute for Will Graham.

If Bedelia desired more from him than a particularly intelligent zoo exhibit, though, she showed no signs. She did not slip free of her dress in front of him, disappearing instead behind a screen they'd set up in the bathroom.

"How do you feel today?" He asked.

"I still believe I am in control of my own actions," she said. "Given your history, that's a good day."

Hannibal smiled, turning his back on the screen so she could slip into the bath. "You have always been in control of your actions, Bedelia," He said as he left the room. "I merely showed you new paths to take."

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Michelle turned ten with little fanfare. She had not yet joined a school or made any friends in Italy, and the people she would have invited in their stead were across the sea, beyond her reach. Nobody knew where Abigail was, though Michelle knew how to use google now and she knew she'd been in the news. They'd called her a Lazarus, whatever that meant.

Michelle turned ten with cake and mac and cheese, but it was not the same. She turned ten in a lonely room with only Tėtis and Miss Bedelia for company. She turned ten, and thought it felt much the same as being nine.

Tėtis had bought her a few gifts, among them a new doll with delicate, porcelain features. He told her she had to be very careful with it, that this was a doll for looking, not for playing (Why anyone would make a doll you couldn't play with, Tėtis had not bothered to explain).

Three days after her birthday, Michelle drowned the doll in the bathtub, feeling it's pretty face shatter under the pressure of her hands. She could not have explained why she did it. She had just been angry-sad-mixed-up. And she had *hated* the stupid doll.

Tėtis had frowned and called it an accident, cleaning up the shards so that Michelle didn't cut herself on them. But Miss Bedelia…

Miss Bedelia had tilted her head and stared at Michelle, so long and intent that Michelle was *sure* she knew. She couldn't place Miss Bedelia's expression, but it was laser-focused and felt prickly against her skin.

Michelle did not break any other toys.

When Michelle was ten, Tėtis pulled her aside and told her a friend was coming for dinner. That this friend suspected them, and that she should keep to her cover story no matter what this friend said or how much he seemed to know. Michelle agreed, and that was the night Antony Dimmond came to visit.

Michelle hated him immediately.

She hated his smile. She hated his laugh. She hated his stupid curly hair. She hated having to pretend a *completely different* story because Antony Dimmond somehow *knew* they were not the Fells.

Most of all, she hated how Tėtis smiled back at him. Like he was *funny,* and *clever*. Like Tėtis *liked* him.

They had kicked Michelle out of the room soon after, to talk about *grownup* things. It had been the worst night of Italy so far.

And then Tėtis had the nerve to invite him over *again.* She could hear them talking, in the other room, hushed whispers she couldn't quite make out.

Then she heard the *thud*, and the wet, shuddering gasp.

Maybe, she thought to herself, *maybe Tėtis didn't like him all that much after all.*

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Bedelia had the nerve to look appalled, to wear judgement on her features as though she hadn't known exactly what she was getting into.

"Observing or participating?" he asked her.

"What?" she breathed.

"Are you, in this moment, observing or participating?"

There was fear in her eyes, a dread that had been there since Hannibal had fed her oysters and acorns, since he'd delivered his lecture to the *studiolo*.

She feared him, and she was fascinated by him, in equal measures. Hannibal was struck, once again, by how inadequate a substitute she was for Will Graham.

"Observing," Bedelia said.

Hannibal cocked his head, a sliver of delight creeping across his face.

"You say that," he said. "But this is participation, Bedelia. Did you know what I would do when you asked him to help you?"

"I was curious."

"Curious," he said, drawing the word out. "What would happen. What Mr. Dimmond would do. Did you anticipate—"

There was a *thud*, and a soft little 'oops.' They both looked over.

Antony had not made it all the way to the door, of course. Hannibal had been tracking him, out of the corner of his eye. Not attentively enough, it seemed.

Antony had stopped his crawling, staring up with horrified shock in his eyes. Michelle stood next to his shoulders, hands still outstretched from where she'd held the statue over his head. She'd dropped it there, and missed, the statue bouncing harmlessly, if painfully, off Antony's shoulders.

Bedelia made a sound beside him, soft and startled. Michelle looked up with curiously blank eyes.

"He's leaving," she said, as if two little words summed everything up. And perhaps they did.

"Well," Hannibal said, "we can't have that, can we?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke in the hospital with an ache in his gut and in his chest. A prolonged feeling of regret that did not fade as he rubbed sleep away from his face.

The first doctor was calm, quiet. The next was not. And the next. A cacophony of doctors and nurses paraded about his room for what felt like days on end.

But eventually, it quieted down, and he was cleared for visitors. The first visitor was Doctor Fredrick Chilton.

The second was Beverly Katz.

She may as well have floated in wrapped in bedsheets, for all Will felt as though he was seeing a ghost. He found himself glancing towards his morphine drip, wondering if something had gone very wrong.

“You don’t get the newspaper in here?” Bev joked, but it rang hollow. Everything about her looked hollow. There were bags under her eyes so deep and dark that they gave her a deathly look. She walked hesitantly, as though just getting used to new limbs, and when she pulled up a chair by Will’s bedside, she nearly collapsed into it.

“They say they found me wrapped in a blanket, propped up against a planter box outside the FBI headquarters. Looked like someone had placed me there with great care.” She looked at him meaningfully, and he knew they were both thinking the same thing.

Abigail.

“He kept you alive.” And had never once used her the way he used Miriam Lass. Bev sighed.

“What was it you said about Elise Nichols, way back when? Whatever he did to the others, he couldn’t do it to me.”

“He saw you as an equal. Not one of his pigs to slaughter.”

“I suppose I should be flattered?” Bev shook her head with an empty laugh. “You know, I don’t remember any of it. I remember going to investigate his house, and then I woke up here.”

“You found something, then. Some sort of evidence that would have convicted him.”

“Or Abigail Hobbs.”

She would have lived there, in the house with him. Or elsewhere, Hannibal was likely to have other locations to do his work. But she might have been there when Will was, hidden away,

living, breathing.

Bev had been there too.

The lump of betrayal that had formed in Hannibal's kitchen made itself known, twisting in Will's gut.

"I'm sorry."

"You didn't do it."

"I didn't stop it, either."

Bev cocked her head. "Hannibal Lecter twists the world around him to suit his whims. I can't blame you for being caught up in it."

Will *could* blame himself, though. The question was, did he?

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The boat was something to do, something to distract himself with. Will spent long hours wrapped in it, enough to forget the world around him.

Bev visited on occasion. More than Will thought she would. She sat on milk crates and handed him tools, babbling about her life or her siblings or, on harder days, her therapy.

It took three weeks for Jack Crawford to come knocking. He had questions Will couldn't answer. Questions he *could* but didn't want to.

"You told him to run," Jack said. "Why?"

"You know why."

"I want to hear it from you."

Will set his wrench aside. He wanted to sigh. He wanted to scream. He did neither.

"Because I wanted him to run away," he said. "Because I loved him. Because I wanted to go with him."

"The man you loved killed and ate dozens of people."

"And you knew I loved him and sent me in anyway."

"I hoped you would do the right thing."

Will huffed out a laugh. "So did I." He still wasn't sure he hadn't. The right thing could feel wrong. The wrong thing could feel right. Sometimes the wrong thing was the right thing to do.

"I could use your help finding him."

Finally, Will turned to face Jack, incredulity on his face. “Still?” He asked. “After everything.”

“No one knows Lecter like you.” Jack pressed on. “No one else understands him the way you do.”

“It’s a conflict of interest, don’t you think?”

“There will always be a conflict of interest where Hannibal is involved.”

Will turned back to his tools, running his fingers over them. For a moment he imagined it, what Hannibal would do. Then he set it aside.

“No, Jack.”

When he found Hannibal, it would be on his own terms.

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Hannibal’s house belonged to the FBI for a long while, and then it belonged to Will.

The lawyer came to Wolf Trap with a thick folder and an uneasy smile.

“We suspect Lecter had assets we may never find, resources he’s using even now. But what he left behind, he put in your name.”

Hannibal had known, even then, there was a chance Will wouldn’t go with him. He’d planned for that chance. Will held the deed in his hands, staring down at it blankly.

“He left money, too. Considerable savings accounts. But there’s a lot of red tape involved there. Much of it will go to the families of victims, when they inevitably sue.“

“I don’t want it,” Will said. “They can have it.”

It took weeks for Will to make himself go see the house. When he did, he walked the halls with an empty feeling in his chest. Michelle’s room was just how she left it, a few toys scattered on the floor, abandoned when Jack had come to call.

He cried for the first time, in that room. For what he’d lost. For what he’d given up. For Michelle, for Abigail.

Alana found him, dry-eyed, in the kitchen. He sat on the floor, leaning against the fridge, daring himself to go to the basement. He wasn’t sure he could bear to see it.

“I can still feel the echoes,” she said. “Hannibal leaves handprints on us all.”

“Some of us more than others,” Will acknowledged.

“The biggest marks are the ones you can’t see,” she countered. She wheeled her chair closer to him, looking down at him. “We’re all stained, Will. Not just those of us who wear our

damage on the outside."

"Is that what I am? Damaged?"

Alana didn't dance around the subject, didn't couch her thoughts in pretty words. "Irrevocably. Like the rest of us."

Will barked out a laugh. "He'd like that," he said. "Leaving his mark on those he cared about."

"Did he care about us?"

"As much as a man like him can." Which was as much as any man, Will had learned, but he doubted Alana was ready to hear that.

Alana let that hang between them, considering. "We cared about him," she said. "But it wasn't enough."

"It would never have been enough to make him stop."

"Did you want him to stop?"

Will whirled on her, outrage thumping in his chest. "Of course I wanted him to stop."

He had, hadn't he? Or at least, he had only wanted Hannibal to kill those who deserved it. It was just that he and Will had different opinions on who was deserving.

"You let them leave."

"I didn't have a choice."

"We both know that's not true."

"If it was so easy to stop Hannibal Lecter, someone would have done it by now."

Alana considered that. Finally, she said, "I thought you'd go with them."

"So did I."

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"Why *didn't* you go with him?" Bev asked.

"What?" Will stared at her, face carefully blank. For a moment, he thought she knew. But how could she, when he himself was not decided yet?

He should have gone with Hannibal. He should have killed Hannibal. He should go after him now. He should stay with him. He should take Michelle and run.

Michelle deserved better than the both of them.

“Look, I’m not saying I approve. I’d have helped hunt you down. But if it was going to make you this miserable, why didn’t you go with him?”

“You think I’m miserable?”

“Aren’t you?”

He was. He wanted Hannibal back. He wanted his *daughter* back. He wanted a happy family that didn’t exist. He wanted things he didn’t deserve to have.

“It was Abigail,” he said. “In that moment, I saw every lie he had told. Every secret he had kept. And I couldn’t forgive him.”

Bev considered this. “But you regret it,” she said. “You wish you’d gone with him.”

“I wish a lot of things,” Will said. “I wish there was more justice in the world. I wish Michelle had somewhere safe and happy to grow up.”

“She’s why you’re doing this, isn’t she?” Bev nodded towards the boat.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, I’m going with you.”

“Where?”

Bev scowled at him. “Don’t play dumb with *me*, Will Graham. On your little cruise across the Atlantic. Your quest to find Hannibal and your kid.”

Will considered a lie, tested the shape of it in his mouth, then swallowed it.

“Why?” He finally asked.

Bev sighed, brushing hair away from her face. “Because when you get too close to the edge, someone has to be there to pull you back.”

“You think I might go with him?”

“I think you might kill him,” she said bluntly. “Or he, you. Or, yes, you might go with the romanticized version of him you have in your head. I think it’d be good for you to have someone to remind you why you didn’t go with him in the first place.”

“But you’ll still help me find him.”

“Because I think you need to in order to feel some semblance of okay again.” Bev gave him a stern look, one he imagined his mother might have given him had she bothered to be around. “And because there’s a kid out there who deserves a better life than the one she’s got. But once we find him, we call the authorities and let them take care of it.”

Will drew in a breath, another. He had not yet decided what he would do if he found Hannibal. But Michelle, he knew. Whether he went with Hannibal or not, Michelle would get what she deserved.

“Alright. But you’re going to have to learn to sail.”

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“We couldn’t have taken a plane?” was a constant refrain on their journey.

But Bev worked hard, and she didn’t complain about the long hours or the late nights. When the sun set, she would look up at the stars with wonder in her eyes. Will had to admit, it was nice to have company on his voyage. Weeks alone with only his own thoughts for company… he would have struggled with his choices even more than he already did.

Italy was beautiful. Bev suggested they do a little sightseeing, but there was only one place Will wanted to see.

“Why are we here?” Bev whispered, the third time she followed Will to the Norman Chapel.

“Hannibal mentioned it to me once,” Will said, kneeling in a pew as if in prayer.

“Hannibal mentioned the farmer’s market to me once, should we check there next?”

“You’re welcome to go back to the hotel.”

“Nah,” Bev knelt beside him, hands clasped. “Someone needs to look after you.”

They sat there for a while, Will observing the comings and goings of the church.

“Are you waiting for divine intervention?” Bev finally whispered.

“No.”

“Do you really think he’s going to just walk in in the middle of mass?”

No. But he would come. Will knew it down to his bones.

Maybe not today, though. Will sighed. “Do you want to get lunch?”

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The body appeared two days later. Will stood in the back of the church and felt justified.

“He left me his broken heart.”

“What the *fuck*?” he heard Bev whisper. He ignored her, trying to get a better glimpse of the body.

Will did not have the influence here he’d had with the FBI, little as it had been. They wouldn’t let him any closer to the crime scene, but they *did* point him out to an inspector.

Inspector Pazzi was a suspicious man, and rightfully so. Will would have been suspicious of himself as well.

“Is Will Graham here because of the body or is the body here because of Will Graham?” He asked at the police station. Bev had not been permitted to come in with him for questioning, and Will felt alone and adrift.

Yes, was probably the answer to that question. Without Will, the body would not have appeared. In that way, wasn’t Will the cause?

Inspector Pazzi spun Will a tale, the story of *Il Mostro*. Hannibal, in his youth, had a serious face. Will resisted the urge to ask for the picture. He knew, objectively, that Hannibal had killed before becoming the Chesapeake Ripper. It was different to be presented with the evidence of it, to see the fame he had carved out of Italy. The art he had made.

Weighed down with Hannibal’s past crimes, and a healthy layer of his own guilt, Bev and Will returned to the church. The crime scene been cleared away, but Will had memorized it. He stood by the altar, recreating every angle in his mind.

“How did he know we’d be here?” Bev asked quietly.

“He didn’t. But he knew we’d come.”

Bev considered that. “You called this his ‘broken heart.’ He misses you?”

“Hannibal thinks differently than most people. He might miss me, in his own way.”

“Or he might be fucking with you,” Bev surmised.

“One does not necessarily preclude the other.”

Will looked up at the chapel ceiling, as if he might tune out the world around him.

“After seeing that, do you still wish you’d gone with him?”

The question landed heavily, nearly crushing Will under its weight. How did he say *yes, yes, every day* without sounding like a mad man? He bit his tongue, shook his head.

When he looked at Bev, there was doubt in her eyes.

There was doubt in Inspector Pazzi’s eyes, too, when he joined them.

“You couldn’t catch Hannibal when he was just a kid,” Will pointed out. “What makes you think you’re going to catch him now?”

“You,” Pazzi said, bluntly.

Will glanced at Bev, who glanced back, knowingly. “What makes you think I want to catch him?” He asked.

“Don’t you?” Pazzi asked mildly. “I know your story, Signore Graham. Don’t you want your daughter back?”

Will stiffened. Pazzi was a weasel of a man. He made Will feel cornered, trapped like a fox chased back to its den by the hounds.

“Some things are beyond our reach,” Will finally said. “*Il Mostro* is beyond yours.”

“One never knows until one tries.”

“He’s going to kill you,” Will told him. “You can be his next Botticelli. I’m usually right about these things.”

“Because you know Hannibal Lecter. *Inside* and out.”

Will scowled at the insinuation.

“He sent you his heart,” Pazzi continued. “Where is he now?”

The thought had been tickling at the back of Will’s mind, and it solidified now, concrete. “He’s still here.”

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The catacombs were poorly lit, shadows overtaking the walls, creating pockets of pure darkness. Will rushed through them. He did not wait for Pazzi, or for Bev, though they caught him soon enough.

“What are you going to do when you find him?” Pazzi asked. “Kill him? Join him?”

They didn’t find Hannibal. Pazzi left Will with that thought, hanging in the air. Will took a deep breath, swallowed shadow and despair.

“Hannibal,” he called quietly, his voice traveling through the empty space. “I forgive you.”

There was a slow intake of breath beside him. “Will,” Bev said, voice steady. “What the *fuck?”*

Chapter End Notes

Don't expect updates this quickly lol i was in a Mood.

Surprise! Bev has rejoined the party. I really wanted someone for Will to bounce off of, and I love BFF Supportive Bev. So there you go.

I hate Pazzi, but he is necessary for the plot. He doesn't give a shit about Bev though so nothing about him changes, and we all know I hate stealing word for word dialogue

from the show, so I skimmed over him a bit.

Next time: More Michelle, and Will drags a baffled Beverly to Lithuania. While Bev complains about her limited vacation time.

End Notes

It is what it is and it updates when it updates. But I promise you guys, I plan to see this story through to its conclusion. I love Michelle and I love all of you-- even though I'm useless at answering comments. I see you, and I appreciate every one of you.

9/22/23: I'm so sorry, guys. I was wrong. I no longer enjoy writing for Hannibal, and I won't be returning to this series. I'm so grateful for everyone who was with me along the way.

The series would have ended with the whole murder family together, Abigail included. Bev would have survived all the way through, although her friendship with Will would not have. Imagine the family happy and whole, somewhere bright and warm. Thanks for reading.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!